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GROWING UP TO READING

READING is important only because it makes better people and helps them to live better in society. It has no importance in and of itself. It is a means to other and more valuable ends. Some of these values are: Silent reading for pleasure as a leisure activity, sharing orally good literature with others, getting information, and following directions. If the person who learns to read does not use reading to get these values, why should he call words and go through the reading motions in school? In teaching children, then, the teacher will get better results if she remembers the *can* and *will* used by Kilpatrick.[1] Children must be so taught that they are both willing and able to read. They must *want* to read, in other words, and they must learn certain techniques so as to gain the ability to read, in other words, and they must learn certain techniques so as to gain the ability to read. *When* and *how* to help the children learn these techniques seems to be the point at which many people stop thinking in terms of child nature and follow patterns.

If we accept the premise that reading is to be used in the development of people, we must pay attention at all times to the development of the wish or desire to read. To do this task well it is necessary for us to be both *willing* and *able* to study the child as a person. Just *when* is he in readiness for reading instruction or when can reading be used in his development? The fact that a child reached the six-year mark chronologically has been the signal to start reading instruction in most cases in the past and too often at the present time. This practice has given disastrous results. Many children have experienced failure in their first year's work and have become emotionally upset. Teachers have tried the hurry-up process to make children read and have caused word calling, dislike for reading, and many other serious problems. Those in authority have expected everyone to learn to read during the first year of school. Pressure has been exerted and passed on down, causing misery to everyone including the child. All because of someone's fixed standards, a certain amount of reading became important and proper attention was not given to the development of the child as a whole.

The best thought now is rejecting chronological age as the criterion for beginning instruction in reading, and many attempts are being made to establish more reliable criteria. It is recognized that there is a kind of intellectual development or inner maturation that we cannot directly *do* anything about. There is another kind of intellectual development which we *can* do much about and that happens through training and experience.[2] The inner maturation[3] spoken of includes such points as mental age of six and one-half years, ability to see likenesses and differences, ability to remember word forms, memory span of ideas, and ability to do abstract thinking.

That such abilities cannot be hurried up by definite training has been shown by experimentation. A quotation from Jersild[4] concerning memory span illustrates this point.

"The question may now be raised to what degree can the memory span be lengthened simply by concentrated training? One group of children in the study by Gates and Taylor received training designed to increase their memory span for digits. Their performance before and after training was

[1] Wm. H. Kilpatrick, *Foundations of Method*, p. 190. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925.

[2] M Lucille Harrison, *Reading Readings*, Chap. ii, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936.

[3] *Op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

[4] Arthur T. Jersild, *Child Psychology*, p. 267. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1933.

compared with that of an equivalent control group, and it was found that training alone did not give the practiced children a lasting superiority over their peers."

Jersild made an experiment using words, testing free association, and Strayer used language. These experiments have given the same testimony:[5] Growth cannot be hurried.

The teacher, therefore, should be concerned with those things which *can* be changed in the development of the child instead of trying to devise schemes for making the child do that for which he is not fitted. Ruth Streitz[6] in her chapter "When should reading experiences begin?" in *Growth and Development: The Basis for Educational Programs,* reports an interesting experiment in the Cincinnati Public Schools. In 1931-32 Miss Allie M. Hines, Director of primary grades, made a comprehensive study of first-grade children who were repeating the grade because of inability to read. She found about one-fifth of the children were repeating and that seventy-five per cent of these repeaters were mentally immature for reading. Six and one-half years mentally is considered the earliest age for reading instruction to begin—not because a child mentally younger cannot learn parrot-like some of the symbols, but because it is not possible for children to really use reading understandingly at an earlier age. Reading is more than recognizing and calling words. It is a complex activity which requires the ability to reason and do abstract thinking. To be meaningful, words must recall ideas and make connections in the mind with other ideas; thus reading pre-supposes a fund of concepts and the ability to understand relationships. We are concerned, then, with those experiences we can give young children which will best allow these abilities to develop rather than with the use of printed symbols at the outset.

[5]*Op. Cit.,* p. 60.
[6]Ruth Streitz et al, *Growth and Development: The Basis for Educational Programs,* p. 192.

When teachers of first grade are given all the children who are six years old chronologically without regard to mental age and physical development, they must begin where these individuals actually *are*—not where they *wish* all of them *were*. Such a group of first-grade children usually ranges from the mental age of four to eight years. There may be a few gifted children above this range of mental age, and a few defectives below. It is obvious, then, that all of these children are not ready to begin to use symbols.

Since it is the task of the teacher to begin where these *many* individuals are, she must begin with experiences. Each child can thus take part in some work at which he feels very much at home. He works purposefully with *things* and learns to talk in terms of objects he can see and touch. From such manipulation and observation every child gets many ideas and concepts upon which his ability to think is built. Along with such understanding, spoken language is accumulated and much use of spoken language certainly precedes the use of symbols. In other words, children *do, talk,* and *learn.* Sensory experiences form the natural connection between the minds of the children and the world about them. Activities, then, form the basis for accumulating ideas and words to fit them, and growth takes place.

The activities in which the children engage must be of worth to the children themselves. The children must see *sense* in doing them, in other words. Each child, therefore, must choose a job. The teacher may assist and stimulate, but the choice should be the child's own. In order to be of service in the selection of profitable work, the teacher will need to know the backgrounds and the abilities of those who make up her group. She will better understand the choices of the children and will be more able to assist wisely. The teacher will be most helpful if she talks with the group about their choices and gives them the op-

portunity of exchanging ideas. An exchange of ideas in the group is stimulating to children who have few ideas for work and it develops ability in language. In such a talk with her children, one first-grade teacher found that several members of the group owned unusual pets which they wished to bring to school. They began to construct pens for their pets and to learn the type of treatment which should be given the pets for a day or two at school. Other children, in like manner, selected jobs they wanted to do. There were, then, several types of activities going on and many interesting things to talk about in the group. The teacher, with a fund of correct information as her background, guided the discussion so as to encourage constructive thinking. Thus, she raised the expression of ideas and the choice of words to a higher level and gradually worked for better enunciation and pronunciation. At all times she kept the children feeling at ease and eager to express their thoughts.

In the matters of enunciation and pronunciation there is much individual work to be done. Every year some children have to be taught to say *fruit* instead of *thruit* and *from* instead of *throm;* the *d* is used for *g* and *t* for *c*. Many children say *drass* for *grass* and *atross* for *across*. Every year children need to be taught that there is no such word as *smorning*. When shown a sentence which read, "This morning we went to the fire station," two or three children in the group wanted to know where *smorning* was in the sentence. They were puzzled when they found out that two words were there instead of one. In order to detect and remedy such errors of speech, the teacher needs to be keenly aware of what the children are saying and tactful in her correction. The errors must be corrected by showing the child how to use his tongue and lips to make the proper sound. The ear must also be trained to hear the difference between such sounds as *th* and *f*, *d* and *g* in words. This individual work is only one of the many reasons for having small first-grade groups. Without many opportunities for talking, errors in speech will never be discovered and children will continue to practice the wrong forms of words. Incorrect pronunciations will surely confuse the child when he begins to read; therefore, the duty of the teacher is to help each child grow in the ability to use language meaningfully and correctly.

To be sure that the children use language meaningfully, it is necessary for the teacher to check constantly to see what concepts the children are building. If false concepts are built, accurate reading will not result when the children begin to use books. Even though it takes much time and energy to find out what the children are thinking, the teacher must do it in order to build clear-cut, correct concepts which must form a background for reading. Harrison, in *Reading Readiness*[7], reports an example of the development of a wrong concept. A teacher explained the meaning of the word *igloo* to the children and told them that instead of ice they could use cornstarch and salt to make an igloo. The children did much to set up an Eskimo scene on the floor. When some visitors came in and began to talk to the children, it was discovered that some of them had the idea that Eskimos made igloos of cornstarch and salt. The word *igloo* had the wrong concept attached to it in the minds of the children; therefore, any use of this symbol in reading would not have had correct meaning.

A young teacher taught a group of first-grade children a song which began with these words: "Hop, hop, hop! reins I will not drop." That afternoon of the children sang the song at home with these words: "Hop, hop, hop! 'range 'em in a drop." The teacher had not discussed the meaning of the words with the children and each

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

child repeated what *he* heard without meaning.

This difficulty frequently occurs when the children get away from first-hand experiences and the teacher does not connect the new ideas with the experiences which the children have had. Enough importance is not attached to the mental pictures which the child is receiving through the words he learns.

The more meaningful the experiences are to the children, the better the growth in every way. A program of meaningful experiences in the school will help the children get a wealth of correct concepts, a broad spoken vocabulary, more accurate enunciation and pronunciation, more ability to think, and a desire to read. In such a program the teacher is developing the individual as a useful person in society and in so doing is developing those abilities which produce both the *desire* and the *ability* to read. If reading from books is considered a meaningful activity only after the child has reached sufficient maturity, it can be a natural activity. The school can, therefore, remove the strain and waste of energy on the part of children and teachers in connection with learning to read. Ruth Streitz[8] says that "if the organism is not 'ready' we need devices, some machinery, or some mechanical way of stimulating the organism to respond. So, teachers have had a fairy sitting upon every word in order to aid the child in maturing instead of having actual experiences that need no such dressing up."

This paper has considered *reading* as a stage of child development at which children cannot arrive according to a prearranged schedule. Through wide experiences they grow and acquire abilities which make reading not only possible and profitable, but a pleasant activity. The children *can* and *will* use reading in purposeful living if they are so taught that they accumulate a wealth of accurate concepts and habits of speech which will give meaning to printed language.

Such physical factors as general health, vision, and hearing greatly influence readiness for reading, but that subject is too large to include in this discussion.

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[8] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

WHEN AND HOW TO BEGIN READING

ALTHOUGH a great deal has been written on the subject of beginning reading, first-grade teachers are still confronted with the question of what to do with six-year-olds who come into the first grade in September, many of whom are not yet mature enough to start a formal reading program. In this article three phases of the problem will be briefly discussed: (a) how to know when a child is ready to read, (b) what to do with the child who is *not* ready to read, and (c) how to begin with the child who *is* ready to read.

No longer do first-grade teachers assume that a child's chronological age of six years is the criterion for determining his readiness for beginning reading. Nor do they lay special emphasis on the child's mental ability as the chief determining factor. The whole child is studied; his mental, physical, and emotional make-up are considered in deciding whether or not he is mature enough to profit by definite reading activities. By means of intelligence tests, physical examinations, reading readiness tests, and close observation, teachers determine the child's readiness for reading. Some of the factors considered are as follows:

1. A chronological and mental age of approximately 6½ years.
2. Good physical health, including normal speech, vision, and hearing.
3. Emotional adjustment to school and the ability to work satisfactorily with others.
4. Good English habits, including the